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Alicia: My Search for Peace, a Nun's Story

I was born into a Roman Catholic household. As a child I knew nothing but abuse and ill-treatment from a mother, a father and then a step-father, of whom I was terrified. Because they were people well-known in business and musical circles, their cruelty was never discovered.

When the time came for schooling, I was sent to a convent. It was run by nuns whose lives were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The emphasis of the religious education was on devotion to Our Lady. Great stress was laid on the fact that, after confession of one's sins to a priest, salvation depended almost entirely upon the intercession of the Mother of God. We addressed her by countless titles.

At the age of eighteen, I made a desperate attempt at suicide. Since I was under-age and my mother did not want me back, I was placed in the charge of a Roman Catholic probation officer. Without home, friends, or money, I consented to go to the convent which the probation officer assured me would be ideal for recovery.

Convent Days

The probation officer took me to the convent. I would not see the outside world again until I was thirty-six. Inside this 'religious institution' such things as Christian love, mercy, kindness and concern for one another were unknown. It was a place of hard work, unspeakable living conditions, and severe punishment. We had to do penance in order to try to earn forgiveness for our sins. We had to work in strict silence; even our scanty meals were eaten in silence while someone read from the lives of the saints.

Only on Sundays were we allowed to read anything for ourselves, unless we had been deprived of the privilege as a punishment. Our reading matter was exclusively Roman Catholic books. In all the years I was shut away, I never saw a newspaper. No one knew what was going on the outside.

When I realized how I had been tricked, I suddenly came to life again. Life became sweet, and I now wanted to hang on to it and to get out. If I did get out, when would I go? The nuns knew well that I was without a friend in the world and that no one would ever come and claim me. In the end, I resigned myself to being there for the rest of my life.

I turned to the only consolation that was left for me--religion. This consisted for the most part of praying to statues and pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. I believed that

all this devotion was the right way to go about getting peace with God. As a Roman Catholic, I was striving after something that eluded me.

The Search for Peace

In the convent I was eventually made a Child of Mary as a reward for good conduct. However, in spite of accepting the hardships of my life as a penance for what I had done, and try as I would, I could not get peace with God nor feel any forgiveness for my sins. No matter what I did, that barrier remained between me and that dread 'Being' up there, of whom I was so afraid.

The years went by and time became meaningless. I don't remember now what age I was when the idea first entered my head that I wanted to become a nun. Surely if I could become a nun and live a life of complete dedication to God, I could earn forgiveness for my sins and find the right way to peace with Him.

How was I to become a nun? I had no money and girls and women who wished to enter Roman Catholic religious orders usually had to take a sum of money in with them as a dowry, since they were becoming 'brides of Christ', but I hadn't a penny. I had no position in life, no friends or relations to pull strings on my behalf, and I was in a most unrespectable situation for anyone wanting to be a nun.

In the end I was allowed to make my request known to Mother Superior. To my great joy at the time, she told me that there was just one religious order open to someone like me--a strictly enclosed Third Order of Carmelites, a very penitential order. I was transferred and eventually became known as Sister Magdalene of the Passion. I entered with full enthusiasm and great ideas, but I did not find the kind of life I had expected. Nor did I find what I had gone to seek--peace with God.

First Steps to Freedom

There seemed to be so much 'performance' of religion and so little of anything that was real. Deep down inside me was the desire for something deeper, a longing for something that was eluding me. I did not know what it was, but something was causing me the greatest uneasiness and dissatisfaction. An inner conviction was telling me I was in the wrong place.

Years ago it was considered a great scandal for an enclosed nun to return to the world after being clothed with the habit of an order and pronounced 'the bride of Christ'. There was one thing, however, I had not done: I had not taken final vows, and nothing would induce me to do so. I began to question obedience to religious superiors and many other things. Being in a Protestant country, and not having taken my final vows, I could not be kept against my will, but I had much to go through before I was released.

At thirty-six years of age, I came out of the convent into a world of war in the heart of London which was getting the worst of it. This was the first step taken on my journey toward finding peace with God. I was in disgrace with Holy Mother Church and sickened with religion which had failed me.

Almost immediately, my age group had to register for war work and, not wishing to go into the armed services, I was sent to airplane engineering. I was bitter, disillusioned, friendless, homeless and penniless. I was under the continual strain of war. Though I could hardly have cared less at the time as buildings crashed around me, again and again my life was preserved and brought out of the shadow of death. To be killed in an air-raid, without the knowledge of salvation, was not in God's plan for me.

An Unhappy Marriage

Soon I was transferred to Scotland on war work and there I eventually met a man, a widower, who asked me to marry him. For the first time in my life I was being offered a chance of security, a home of my own, a name, an opportunity to settle down and take root somewhere. The offer was too good to refuse. This man was a Protestant, very 'religious', an elder of his church but, like myself knew nothing of salvation.

Things went from bad to worse, and I bitterly regretted the step I had taken in such haste. I began to think that the misery of my married life was a punishment from God for what I had done by marrying outside the Church of Rome. The more I thought about it, the more I longed once again to try to get right with God.

On the Run

After my husband had gone fishing for a weekend, I went to Manchester. I had never been there before but I knew it had a convent of the same order in which I had been. I told my story to the Mother Superior, expressed my great desire to get to confession and declared my intention to stay in the convent, this time for good.

The next three to four days were spent in a small room. The Mother Superior did not come back to see me and no word came from the Bishop who had to be consulted because I was married in the eyes of the law. One afternoon while I was sitting reading the life of a saint, I was convicted that I was to go back to my husband. I put my few belongings in my case, put on my hat and coat and made it out the front door.

Still convinced that I was to return to my husband, I sent him a telegram to meet me at Glasgow Central. If he did not come, I would not even have bus fare to where we lived. When the train drew into the central station there he was standing on the platform! He was so glad to see me, he did not ask where I had been. Again I had made an attempt to find peace with God, but had gone the wrong way about it. *"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death"* (Proverbs 14:12).

A Temporary Respite

We talked things over and decided that we would try once more to make a go of our marriage. For my husband's sake, I attended his church. This was merely an outward gesture for I certainly was not going to unite in worship with heretics or handle the forbidden book, the Bible. At heart, I was still a convicted Roman Catholic and knew nothing of salvation or the new creation to be found through Jesus Christ.

Once again our marriage began to come undone. In desperation, I started to make plans to run away again. This time I would not go to a convent. I intended to seek all the things my marriage had not given me. Only a lack of money held me back.

Divine Intervention

Into this hopeless situation, God intervened. We were as lost as any two people can be: a religious man who did not know he was lost and an ex-religious woman who knew well that she was helpless. Does not our Lord Himself tell us that is the very reason He came to this earth? He came to seek and to save the lost. He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Does He not tell us that as the Good Shepherd, He would leave ninety-nine sheep in

the fold and go after just one that was lost? *“For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out”* (Ezekiel 34:11).

And so the hand of God started events moving without either of us being aware of it. A certain preacher was coming to Scotland to conduct a crusade. I was vaguely interested. What was this man going to tell Scotland? I shelved my plan to run away for the time being.

In due time, I went with a bus from our church. For the first time in my life I found myself in a vast evangelical gathering. I had no idea what was going on. There I saw the words, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”, and I heard for the first time the words, “Ye must be born again.” There was a new way of preaching from the Bible, very different from anything I had ever heard. My interest was truly aroused and questions were arising in my mind. Was there salvation outside the Church of Rome? The preacher said that salvation was obtained through believing in the finished work of Christ at Calvary, not through belonging to any particular church. All my training and indoctrination denied such a possibility. But this preacher kept asking us to repent and come to Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Who was right?

I forgot about running away. Repeatedly, I went back to hear the preacher, ten times in all. For the fourth time, I was seeking a way to peace with God. I did not receive Jesus Christ at any of the meetings for two main reasons: fear of my husband and the far greater fear of being involved with heretics. In spite of my fears, it now became the most important thing in my life to try to discover the truth. Nothing else mattered.

Gloriously Saved

Three months later, there was a follow-up to the crusade. Still seeking answers to all the questions that were troubling me, I attended the meetings in a near-by town. Night after night I went and the words of Psalm 107:6 became real for me: *“Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses.”*

On Saturday my husband went away to fish for the day, and I went to the evening meeting. There, as the evangelist preached, I knew for certain that the Lord Jesus had settled the question of sin once and forever by His death, and that at Calvary the work of atonement had been finished. In believing in Jesus Christ and His finished work of salvation, my burden was lifted, my sins were forgiven. At last, the way to peace with God became a reality for me!

The evangelist spoke with me that night and told me to do two things: start reading the Bible every day and when I went home tell my husband that I was saved. Read the Bible and tell him! I didn't know which was worse! I was forty years old and the Bible had been the forbidden book which I had never opened in my life.

At midnight my husband arrived home. His train had been delayed and he was tired, cold and hungry. I met him at the door and told him I was saved. It most certainly was not the right moment. The next day I opened the Bible while my husband was at work and read a chapter of “begats” and I couldn't understand a word of it. Thus for example Genesis chapter 4 verse 18, *“and unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech.”*

In the Wilderness

For three years, I was in a wilderness experience. My life had been completely changed; I knew where my duty lay as a wife. Yet, here I was a newly born Christian with no help or encouragement from minister, church or evangelical fellowship.

Then there was the opposition of my husband. He had no understanding of what had happened to me. Day by day I struggled on, continuing to read the Bible sticking mainly to parts of the New Testament which I could understand, and light came. *“Can God furnish a table in the wilderness”* (Psalm 78:19)?

Sometimes the terrible fear came upon me that perhaps I had taken the wrong step. However, the Lord led me to the sure and certain knowledge of the infallibility of His Word, *“which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:15). I hung onto the knowledge of the truth that had made me free. *“In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths”* (Proverbs 3:6).

The Fellowship of Believers

Through reading the word of God, there came the time when I desired to undergo believer's baptism. I did not know how to go about it, but seeing the name “Baptist Church” in the local paper, I went to a Sunday evening service when my husband was at work. Once inside I knew this was the place for me because the Word was being preached, the first preaching I had heard since the night I was converted three years earlier. The hand of fellowship was offered to me at the door for the first time in my life.

When my husband found out where I had been, he had other ideas. I was to attend the church where he was an elder. On this one point, I was determined I would not give in. Eventually I saw the minister of the church I was attending and asked to be baptized. The minister agreed to my request, but I would have to tell my husband and invite him to the service. The only thing I could think of saying was, “You tell him.”

Home I went to tell my husband that a Baptist minister was coming to see him. The minister arrived and to my astonishment my husband sat and listened. For the first time he was challenged about salvation, challenged about the difference between being a member of a church and being a member of the body of Christ by new birth. The minister invited him to come and see me baptized and to my horror, he said he would.

The God Who Saves

The night for my baptism arrived. The first half of the service was conducted and the sermon preached. Baptism was not mentioned, rather the focus was on salvation. In the plan and purposes of God for each of our lives, His timing is always perfect. As I went under the water, symbolically into death with Christ, my husband believed and he was saved. My husband had passed from death to life; he had entered that church dead in sin and left it alive for ever more!

Knowing nothing of what happened, I dreaded the thought of going home on the bus with John. Like a typical Scot, he took his time before he told me what happened; but the following Sunday morning we were sitting together in that church, one in Christ.

Four weeks later he followed me through the waters of baptism. God saved both of us individually in His own appointed time. He saved our marriage, reconciled us to Himself, and to each other. Ours became a union truly made by God. Our marriage once on the rocks became

firmly established on the Rock. *“And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation”* (Psalm 107:7).

Peace at Last

Soon after my husband was converted, he lost his job and never worked again. A few months later, it was discovered that he had a fatal disease. In the month of February, 1971, John passed into the presence of his Lord. He has gone ahead to the city of habitation. *“He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their bands in sunder”* (Psalm 107:14).

God brought me out of fear and bondage into glorious freedom and the knowledge of how to *“worship Him in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24). With the beggar in John’s Gospel I also can say, *“One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see”* (John 9:25). I found God to be the God of the hopeless situation.

Is there anyone who has read this story and feels that his personal circumstances could not be worse, or has to struggle on in a divided house? Maybe someone has read this who thinks that everything necessary had been done to get to heaven by joining a church and being on a membership roll. To each one who reads this story, I would say, no matter how difficult your circumstances or how great your need, no matter what your problems are, you can discover even as I did, that God is the One who is able to deal with any situation, however hopeless. He is able to bring you into the glorious and satisfying life of peace which the world cannot give, peace with God. As He says, *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; ...Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”* (John 14:27). Jesus Christ has left us all that is truly good, as His promised good. Peace bestowed to us is peace with God, peace with one another, peace within our own hearts, a tranquility of mind arising from a sense of our justification before God by His powerful grace, *“being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* Romans 3:24